The Power to Name: a history of anonymity in colonial West Africa by Stephanie Newell

Jones, Rebecca

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Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press (pb $32.95 – 9780821420324; e-book – 9780821444498). 2013, ix + pp.

Stephanie Newell's *The Power to Name* argues that 'new forms of subjectivity and new political possibilities emerged in relation to the newspaper in colonial West Africa' (3); these subjectivities were informed by the proliferation of pseudonymous and anonymous texts in the newspapers. Drawing on book history and imperial cultural history, and rejecting conventional opinion that anonymity, by definition, does not have a history, *The Power to Name* proposes a highly original history of anonymity particular to colonial British West Africa. The book deploys an impressive range of textual case studies from African-owned newspapers in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and to a lesser extent Liberia and Sierra Leone, from the 1880s to the 1940s – a period of great 'literary creativity and textual experimentation' (2) – focusing on Anglophone newspapers, except for a Yoruba-language case study.

The Power to Name does not reconstruct biographies of its pseudonymous authors, nor present a straightforward history of the West African press. Instead, the opening chapters explore the relationship between print, colonial authority and the colonial public sphere, focusing on authorship, agency and subjectivity. Newell traces negotiations between African-owned newspapers, the relatively liberal Colonial Office in Britain and more repressive regimes on the ground, who feared that anonymous and pseudonymous publications enabled anti-colonial critique.

However, pseudonyms were not just masks for anti-colonial opinion or for writers' 'true' selves, but were used to challenge colonial authority indirectly, 'thwart[ing] imperialist modes of labelling and containing Africans' (8). *The Power to Name* augments existing scholarship on colonial agency and subjectivity by arguing that anonymity and pseudonymity 'dramatically complicated the selves that were expressed' (2) and allowed authors to experiment with 'voices, genders, genres, and opinions' (5). While Newell acknowledges reservations about the applicability of Habermas's public sphere to colonial West Africa, she argues that, in fact, 'nothing could be closer to West African newspapermen's definition of the role of the press' (30). A complex form of anonymous subjectivity was located in what writers imagined as the 'independent textual agency of print' (24), 'disconnected from the writing body' (22) and representing supposedly unbiased public opinion rather than writers' personalities. In a case study on pseudonymous folktales, through which authors expressed political and social opinion, Newell argues that we are 'confronted with a "death of the author" and a birth, in its place, of a radical notion of print as existing beyond the subject, conveying a public voice and public opinion' (121).

Furthermore, while scholarship on colonial agency often emphasises the sincerity of subjectivity, in West African newspapers 'the selves that were articulated were often pseudonymous and playful' (2); pseudonyms could be 'mischievous, experimental, or didactic', satirical or parodic (16). Discussing I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson's trial for leaking colonial dispatches, Newell shows how Wallace-Johnson drew on 'West African traditions of flexible, multiple naming' (94) as anticolonial resistance. Wallace-Johnson insisted that he was on trial in his 'private capacity' rather than his journalistic self – and that this 'capacity' was not implicated in the leaks. Thus he 'mocked the idea that an individual in colonial society should or could possess a singular proper name' (93).

Subsequent chapters focus on gender, analysing the adoption of female pseudonyms by both male and the few known female authors, such as I.B. Thomas's Yoruba-language letter series under the

pseudonym of Lagos prostitute 'Sẹgilọla', J.V. Clinton's short stories and columnist Marjorie Mensah. As well as showing how authors used gendered pseudonyms to comment on female sexuality, and examining the effects of a reader's presumed knowledge of an author's gender, Newell again argues that pseudonyms created print-mediated subjects, rather than simply 'masking' an author.

Advocating for 'situated' histories, Newell argues that French and German colonies have sufficiently different histories that their print cultures are better studied separately from Anglophone colonies; but, as Newell herself points out, future scholarship could put localized histories into comparative dialogue across colonial and postcolonial contexts, which are little discussed in this book (understandably, considering its already impressive scope). Newell examines continuities with West African oral genres (particularly the trickster figure) and local naming practices and masking traditions, but there remains scope for detailed exploration of the conceptualization of pseudonymity in relation to such practices of multiple and flexible naming.

The book's finest moments are its subtle readings of the varied and lively case studies, which also enable Newell to question her own methodology, negotiating between historicizing, biographizing, and respect for pseudonymity, while recognising that race, class and gender matter. Discussing the pseudonymous Effective's article 'Has the African a God?', Newell argues that the colonial authorities' insistence on a sincere close reading was 'the sole interpretive maneuver' required to render the article seditious in intent (83); this 'lesson in practical criticism' showed that 'seditious intent lies as much with the reader as with the author' (84). Believing in 'textual objectivity', the authorities ignored the effects of their own positionality on their reading, and disregarded the author's 'autobiographical playfulness' (173). Therefore, Newell argues, close reading and content analysis must be supplemented by a 'selective "resurrection" of authors, positioned in relation to power, politics, and cultural production' (181), recognising the *effects* of identity markers rather than simply using them as descriptors (178).

The Power to Name is an ambitious history of authorship, textuality, readerships and publics in West Africa that will interest historians as well as literary and cultural scholars. Newell's challenging examination of methodology will be of importance to scholars of literatures beyond the newspapers that are the fascinating subject of this book.

Rebecca Jones

University of Birmingham

R.K.Jones@bham.ac.uk